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ABSTRACT

Although increased communication between school personnel and parents is now widely held to be beneficial, present knowledge is based principally on nonsystematic studies at the preschool and primary levels that are of questionable validity at the secondary level. To make up for the lack of emphasis in previous research on establishing specific objectives and assessing measurable outcomes with regard to the goal of improved communications, and at the same time to define objectives in terms of promising techniques for improving communications currently being used in the daily operation of schools, researchers should link evaluation activities to the following six aspects of the school-home communications mix: (1) the academic level at which interactions occur, (2) the locus of communication, (3) whether the school's message is directed to an individual family or to a group or schoolwide audience, (4) whether communications flow from school to home or home to school, (5) topics around which interactions may occur, and (6) the communication methods or vehicles employed. Local school systems should carefully select for study limited sets of communication strategies that meet their local communication needs. Subsequent evaluation of such strategies can contribute to our understanding of the art of improving relations and school effectiveness. (JBM)

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Evaluation of School-Home Communication Strategies[1]

Edward E. Gotts and Richard F. Purnell[2]

The implementation of communication between school personnel and parents has been shown to increase rates of attendance (Duncan, 1969; Parker and McCoy, 1977; Sheats and Dunkelberger, 1979; Shelton and Dobson, 1973), to improve the school performance of children (Bittle, 1975; Duncan, 1969; Shelton and Dobson, 1973), and to increase parent-initiated contacts with school (Bittle, 1975; Duncan, 1969; Mager, 1980; Parker and McCoy, 1977). An extensive search of the school-home relations literature reveals, however, that present knowledge is based principally on non-systematic studies at the preschool and primary levels, while few studies have been conducted at the secondary level (Gotts and Purnell, in press).

Among researchers, school personnel, and parents, there appears to be widespread consensus that improved school-family relations are beneficial, and that increased parent involvement in schools is a worthwhile goal. Nevertheless, in reports of programs with this general goal, specific objectives are seldom stated. Consequently evaluation results are sometimes vague and unclear (Anselmo, 1977; Filipczak, Lordeman, and Friedman, 1977; Nedler and McAfee, 1979). Filipczak and others (1977) conclude that communication between home and school requires an increased emphasis on measureable outcomes to assess program effectiveness.

There remains much to be learned about this art of communicating effectively on the part of both school personnel and parents in order to have

school-family relations become more meaningful and effective. This seems clear from the mistrust, misperception, and miscommunication that so often mar their efforts to relate to one another (Lightfoot, 1978). Such negative results need not be the norm. For example, our own research suggests that communication and mutual positive feelings increase when schools pay particular attention to the artful practice of communication in such areas as attendance, academic deficiencies, progress toward graduation, student misconduct, the school's expectations and standards, and providing current news on curricular and extracurricular events (Gotts and Purnell, in press).

This brief review of literature plus our own experience support three conclusions:

(1) little is known about what works well at the secondary level, and, while more is known at the primary level, the knowledge is based on non-systematic studies;

(2) there is a broad consensus that improved communications should be a goal of schools, but too little emphasis has been placed on establishing specific objectives and assessing measurable outcomes; and

(3) in our research it has seemed most productive to define objectives in terms of specific promising techniques of communication that are being applied to typical day-to-day issues in the operation of schools--such as

   (a) reporting academic deficiences
   (b) providing current news of the school's curricular and extra-curricular events, and so forth.

In short, this is a "poorly researched" area partly because the task of research has not been well defined and conceptualized heretofore. Much that needs to be accomplished can be done within an evaluation research framework. For this reason, the balance of this presentation will focus on defining and

conceptualizing the task from an evaluation perspective. We will present data in support of our conceptual approach and refer to some of our work-in-progress to illustrate how the approach is carried out.

A Conceptual Approach

The following conceptual approach was developed to meet our study requirements during AEL's three years of action research into this topical area. We have come to believe that researchers should link any proposed evaluation activities to six aspects of the school-home communications mix:

(1) The level at which interactions occur (e.g., primary vs. secondary);

(2) the locus of communication (i.e., classroom, department, school, central office);

(3) whether the school's message is directed to an individual family (type I) or to a group or schoolwide audience (type G);

(4) whether communication flows from school to home (school-home or S-H) or home to school (home-school or H-S);

(5) the focal or topical areas around which interactions may occur; and

(6) the methods or vehicles of communication employed.

(1) Levels of Interaction

The styles of parent-child and teacher-child interaction change dramatically from the preschool through the elementary and into the secondary school years. Yet as we have reviewed the literature thoroughly, it appears that parent involvement specialists and researchers have tried to apply a single model of school-home relations, irrespective of the child's age. Moreover, the uniform model applied is one that has developed out of early

childhood education. Extrapolating from the preschool to the primary level seems to have worked reasonably well, e.g., regarding having parents visit school or join parent-teacher organizations. When these expectations have not worked out at the secondary level, educators have erroneously concluded that parents of teens have "lost interest"--yet it is the inappropriate application of an early childhood model of home-school relations that is at fault. From this we conclude that quite different outcome indicators are needed to evaluate parent involvement across the years and levels of schooling.

(2) Locus of Communication

It is necessary first to conceptualize whether the locus of communication is the classroom, school building or other level. Locus of communication can normally be determined by a functional analysis of where opportunity and responsibility reside for the particular matter at issue. An academic deficiency, for example, can be communicated naturally at the classroom level; relating a serious breech of conduct may fall to the principal or a designate. Attending to locus of communication leads the evaluator to consider where within the system to look for and track interactions regarding particular issues. If communication fails to occur where expected, that may point up problems at the level being examined or at some higher level in the system--e.g., teachers may not initiate communications about particular matters because they believe it is the responsibility of personnel at a supervisory level. Either internal miscommunication or insufficient understanding/skills or the absence of policy and clear guidelines for practice may be the culprits.

(3) Type I and G Communications

When schools communicate with parents, individuals (I) or groups (G) may

be the intended audience. For example, all parents need to be familiar with attendance policy (type G); the parents of an absentee child need to be informed (type I). Both types I and G communications are needed if parents are to take expected actions. Evaluation may, thus, assess the sufficiency and quality of both G and I types and examine their relationships with various outcomes. Sometimes it is not enough to inform parents: they may require instruction, guidance or direct help. We found in our research, for instance, that early notices of academic deficiency were appreciated by parents, but few parents knew how to go about analyzing and helping with such problems (Gotts and Purnell, in press). In response to this discovery we have prepared "guidance sheets" to help parents analyze and respond more effectively to potential sources of academic failure, and we are currently assessing the effects of these in a number of sites. From this it can be seen that evaluation of school-home communications must be conducted within a systems perspective by considering the interrelatedness of all elements in the system.

(4) S-H and H-S Communications

School to home (S-H) and home to school (H-S) communications are both part of an effective program. Schools tend to be active as S-H communicators but are much less successful in encouraging H-S messages. Even when the latter occur, they are likely to happen in incidental, spontaneous, informal, and unplanned ways. As a result, the H-S messages seldom leave any data-based residual to influence schools systematically. To counteract the lack of H-S communications, we designed an interview procedure for sampling parents' views and feeding them directly back to principals and superintendents. In the process we learned that these administrators (a) recognized the implications

of the findings, (b) immediately indicated possible changes they might try, and (c) subsequently developed and carried out improved practices (Gotts and Purnell, in press). We are currently experimenting in several sites with the use of local volunteers to conduct interviews of this type. If this strategy works out, then we will prepare a step-by-step operational manual to guide interested administrators, researchers, and others through the required activities. In this way the H-S side of the desired two-way process can be formalized. Our recommendation to evaluators is that any school-home relations program should be advised to include plans for generating H-S messages.

(5) Focal Areas

It is difficult to develop operational measures for such broad constructs as involvement, relations, and communications. When evaluators try to work from these global notions, they often look at self-reported attitudes, measures of attendance or compliance, ratings of satisfaction or success, and similar indicators. We recommend instead that efforts to improve communications should focus on specific areas such as academic progress, attendance, student conduct, progress toward graduation, extracurricular activities, opportunities for parents to serve as volunteers, and so forth. Once these focal areas are linked to communication objectives, evaluation can seek to define success in terms of: (a) whether parents learned about these specific areas, (b) if the information was timely and sufficient, (c) how they responded, (d) with what results, (e) what further they desire to know, and (f) which methods of communicating are both acceptable to parents and effective in producing desired actions and results.

(6) Vehicles of Communication

Improving relations and involvement is often thought of in terms of global programs or treatments. When such programs are studied, however, it is unclear which independent variable components produce particular effects and which are ineffective. Alternatively, we recommend that research and evaluation examine instead the effects of parent-teacher handbooks, newsletters, academic deficiency reports, academic guidance sheets, parent-teacher conferences, open house, parent interviews, and so on. When these individual vehicles are used as treatments, it becomes possible to examine (a) their individual contributions, (b) the focal areas (see 5 above) which they best convey, (c) optimum strategies for using them, and so on.

Evaluation of Strategies

In the preceding discussion we have considered a conceptual approach to evaluating school-home communications. It requires that empirical attention be directed toward six differentiated aspects of the communication mix. When we refer to strategies of communication, we mean those practices which occur at particular intersections of the six aspects. An example will illustrate the concept of strategy: think of a communication at the high school level (aspect 1) involving teachers (2) and individual families (3) and being sent by the former to the latter (4)--i.e., from school to home--dealing with academic performance (5) and transmitted via a special notice (6). An instance of the foregoing strategy would be an academic deficiency report used at the high school level.

This brings us back to an earlier point: much that needs to be accomplished can be done within an evaluation research framework. We are advocating that local school systems carefully select for study some limited set of strategies that promise to meet their identified local communication needs. Evaluation will then be undertaken in the manner previously suggested above during discussion of the six aspects. Knowledge gained in this manner can impact directly on the operation of the local system; also it can simultaneously contribute to the overall accumulation of understanding of the art of improving relations and school effectiveness.

Notes

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